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FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9260
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA PRIORITY 2297
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0106

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000472

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/E, IO, AND INR/GGI
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA-WATCHER
CJTF-HOA FOR POLAD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PBTS](#) [PHSA](#) [DJ](#) [ER](#) [UN](#) [SO](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI REPORTS ERITREAN "ULTIMATUM" TO REMOVE
TROOPS FROM DOUMEIRA ISLAND

REF: A. DJIBOUTI 449
[1](#)B. DJIBOUTI 443
[1](#)C. NAIROBI 1234

Classified By: DCM ERIC WONG. REASON: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY. Djibouti's Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Yousseuf reports that Eritrean military officials have given Djibouti an "ultimatum" demanding the withdrawal of Djiboutian troops from Doumeira Island, claimed by Djibouti. Djibouti recently deployed troops on the island following Eritrea's emplacement of barracks there, an expansion of Eritrea's military presence from the nearby Ras Doumeira peninsula (refs A-B). FM Yousseuf expressed disappointment with the lack of decisive action by the international community, and reiterated Djibouti's call for a UNSC fact-finding mission to visit the area "before the situation deteriorates." Citing historical protocols dating back to 1900, France's Ambassador to Djibouti asserts that Djibouti and Eritrea may have competing claims to Doumeira Island, and rejects any concept of shared sovereignty over the island. France may dispatch a special envoy to Asmara. Finally, Djiboutian military sources report that approximately one dozen Eritrean troops have abandoned their weapons and defected to Djibouti; the Eritreans will be turned over to UNHCR. END SUMMARY.

MILITARY PRESENCE EXPANDS FROM RAS DOUMEIRA TO NEARBY ISLAND

[1](#)2. (S) In separate discussions on May 20 with Ambassador and DCM, Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Yousseuf reported that the border area between northeastern Djibouti and Eritrea (near Ras Dumeira) remained "very tense," as Djibouti had "received an ultimatum from Eritrean military staff." According to Yousseuf, Eritrea had sent a message to Major General Ahmed Houssein Fathi (Djiboutian CHOD) "demanding" the departure of Djiboutian troops from Doumeira Island. FM Yousseuf explained that Djibouti had decided to deploy troops to Doumeira Island only in response to Eritrea's expansion of its military presence from Ras Dumeira (the peninsula) to Doumeira Island. As Eritrea now had "barracks" on the island, Yousseuf said, "we felt we needed to be there."

[1](#)3. (S) FM Yousseuf expressed disappointment with the lack of "decisive" action by the international community. Some UNSC members, he said, felt that tensions between Eritrea and Djibouti could be resolved bilaterally. In recent UNSC consultations, France's PermRep had been "very clear" about

the situation on the border, whereas the United States had remained silent, much to Djibouti's dismay. Djibouti still believed that a visit by a UNSC fact-finding mission was needed, he said, "before the situation deteriorates."

14. (S) Following his discussion of Eritrea-Djibouti border tensions, FM Youssouf turned immediately to the subject of Somali peace talks hosted in Djibouti the previous week between Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Asmara-backed Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS). Youssouf asserted that ARS representatives were reluctant to return to Asmara, for fear of facing Eritrean "hard-liners." Youssouf said Djibouti welcomed the opportunity to host additional talks and to play a constructive role in bringing about peace in neighboring Somalia.

REJECTION OF SHARED SOVEREIGNTY

15. (S) French Ambassador to Djibouti, Dominique Decherf (STRICTLY PROTECT) informed Ambassador on May 19 that both France and Djibouti held the position that sovereignty over Doumeira Island was not/not shared. He cited January 1900 and July 1901 protocols between France and the Italian foreign minister, that recognized that as the issue of who owned Doumeira Island was not resolved internationally, third countries would be kept off the island. Following a January 16, 1954 protocol between France and the Ethiopian foreign minister, Decherf said France acted in line with its

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conviction that France had title to the island, making regular visits to the island and showing its flag. Thus, according to Decherf, whether correct or not, from the Djibouti and local French perspective, Eritrea and Djibouti do not share co-sovereignty over, or individual half-interests in, the island, but perhaps have competing claims. (NOTE: French-language texts of relevant 1897, 1900, 1901, 1935, and 1954 protocols, as provided by the French Ambassador, have been emailed to AF/E and INR/GGI. END NOTE.)

16. (S) Decherf added that France may dispatch an emissary to Eritrea, to address border tensions with Djibouti.

ERITREAN TROOPS BEGIN DEFECTING TO DJIBOUTI

17. (S) Separately, on May 19, USLO-Djibouti Chief, while performing site surveys for security assistance programs, visited Moulhoule, approximately twenty kilometers from Ras Doumeira and the Eritrean border. While en route from Obock, a local businessman reported that eight Eritrean soldiers had defected to Djibouti, and were reportedly in Obock being debriefed by the Djiboutian military. A Djiboutian Army officer in Moulhoule confirmed that there had been Eritrean defections, but placed the number at twelve, and added that they had come over the span of several days and left their weapons behind when crossing the lines. Other Djiboutian government sources confirm the defections. The GODJ intends to turn the defectors over to UNHCR.

18. (S) The on-site Djiboutian military commander, LTC Ali Soubaneh, gave a brief update to the USLO Chief. He emphasized that everything was calm, and that there had been no shots fired or hostile action taken by either side. He expressed bewilderment when queried about the possible Eritrean motivation for the incursion.

19. (C) The Djiboutian Army has established its headquarters for Ras Doumeira in a customs and immigration facility normally manned by the national police. The outpost in Moulhoule was active, but not overly so. There were perhaps

seventy-five soldiers at the command post and the nearby army post. Less than ten military vehicles (all light trucks) were observed moving between Obock and Moulhoule.

¶10. (C) COMMENT. Djiboutian FM Youssouf currently serves as the president of the Arab League's council of foreign ministers, and thus spearheads the League's efforts to diminish the role of Hezbollah. Youssouf's comments on Djibouti's role in hosting recent Somali peace talks, under the auspices of the UN SRSF for Somalia (ref C), further highlight Djibouti's constructive leadership in seeking to promote regional peace and security. Djibouti therefore finds it frustrating that the international community has failed to condemn Eritrea's military expansion near its border. Cross-border movement by defecting Eritrean troops, and the close proximity of Eritrean and Djiboutian forces at both Ras Doumeira and Doumeira Island, underscore the potential for conflict and the need for international intervention. END COMMENT.
SYMINGTON